



Piero Ferrucci. **Beauty and the Soul**. New York: Tarcher, 2007.

EXCERPTS

For many years I have been running courses on beauty and dealt with it in psychotherapy sessions. I have also interviewed people on the effects beauty has had on them. In studying the subject, I have

cast aside all theoretical preconceptions. As far as possible, I have looked at each experience in an open way, letting it teach me what it had to teach, never using it to prove a point of view. I drew my conclusions afterward.

Furthermore, in conducting these interviews, and generally in all of this study, I followed a basic principle: There is no fixed norm for beauty. I did not decide beforehand what I would or would not regard as beautiful. Whatever anybody regarded as beautiful, I accepted without reservations. In my line of work you do not quarrel with experience. You make of it your starting point.

As I proceeded in my research, I increasingly saw the extraordinary effects of beauty on our personality and all its unsuspected branchings that touch many other sectors, even those which seem to have nothing to do with it: "I forget all my fears," "I understand so many things," "I glimpse happiness," "I feel relieved and fulfilled," "I am grateful to be alive."

Feelings are paramount here. In this digital age—an age of loud emotions, unrelenting stress, and stimuli galore, of fake desires and exposed intimacy, frenetic pace and mass-media bombardment—an age in which our society assaults, haunts, seduces, or paralyzes us— what has happened to our true feelings? We risk losing ourselves in a host of emotions that are not ours, or worse, being stranded in a vast, anonymous void of the heart, maybe without even realizing it. The encounter with beauty takes us easily back to the pure spring of our spontaneous emotional life.

The experience of beauty is multidimensional. When it happens, we usually feel it to be a homogeneous and unitary event. What produces the experience, however, is a variety of independent, and at times coincidental, factors. For instance, I see a Greek temple, I am moved and overcome by a sense of harmony and perfection. What causes this feeling? Is it the perfect proportion of the temple, the Golden Mean—that code of proportion which for classical Greece was the core of all beauty? Or is it the reds and yellows of the poppies and brooms, the fragrance of the sea, the clear air and staggeringly beautiful landscape all around the temple, which are part of my experience? If, instead, I see the temple on a November morning, as it mysteriously emerges from the fog, perhaps it is precisely this gradual revelation that makes it beautiful for me. Or maybe it is the echo of Greek mythology: In this temple I feel the numinous presence of the gods, or I am reminded of Greek and Roman classical poetry. Or perhaps what moves me is the rough texture of ancient stone, the special fascination of ruins, and if I were to look at a brand new copy of the same temple I would be indifferent. Last but not least: I am looking at the temple with the person I love and that makes this moment intense and memorable. What if, instead, I were with a group of coarse tourists, who make loud remarks, carve their names on the columns, and throw their trash around?

As beauty is so often not acknowledged, neither is the evil power of ugliness. Thus we are invaded by it. At some point in my workshops on beauty I invite participants to think about ugliness and its effects on them. They come up with examples: violent video games, animals killed in the slaughterhouse, the spoiling of nature, the horrors of war, land mines that murder the innocent, child abuse. The atmosphere grows heavy, as each sees how astonishingly destructive ugliness can be. This is a part of the seminar I have difficulty in facing, because I know the participants suffer to some degree. And yet to understand beauty fully, we have to meet ugliness face-to-face and acknowledge its power. Otherwise beauty will remain a sentimental and superficial concept.

In the last decades, psychologists have studied various forms of intelligence—mathematical and linguistic intelligence, emotional intelligence, kinetic intelligence, verbal intelligence, and so forth. To these I will add aesthetic intelligence: the faculty of perceiving the beautiful. Where one sees a dump, another sees an enchanted castle. The sounds that one person finds boring may make another's heart leap. In any situation, one person may sense beauty and another may not.

Aesthetic intelligence has various aspects. First, the aesthetic

range. Those who have a wider aesthetic range will be able to experience beauty in many more situations. Instead of finding it, for instance, only in a Beethoven symphony, they can also find it in poetry, understand it in the inner qualities of people, feel it in a book, a film, a landscape, the way a home is decorated, the sound of the rain on the roof, and the thousand banal situations of everyday life.

Second, the depth of experience varies. Some people are just barely touched by beauty. They notice it, but are not really moved. It remains an external and temporary fact. Some, on the other hand, feel that beauty penetrates them. They can feel that beauty, at least in that moment, pervades their whole being, moves them, perhaps even overwhelms them.

Third, the capacity to integrate beauty also varies. If I appreciate the beauty in a piece of music, or a poem, for instance, I can let this beauty not only touch me, but also change me: It alters my thinking, continues to work inside me, influences my way of relating to others, of acting in the world, even my relationship to the planet I inhabit. I see and feel the connections that an experience of beauty makes in all sectors of my life.

In order to study and understand the experience of beauty and its effects, I have been interviewing many people for several years. As they talk, I notice consistent reactions at the moment they evoke an

aesthetic experience: Their eyes light up, they smile, their faces relax, their voices become lower and calmer, their breathing deeper, their posture more open. The most common effects they mention is that beauty has made them happy, has soothed them when they were distressed, has been an invisible ally during critical phases of their life, has reassured them when they were scared, given them strength when they felt weak. In those moments, a feeling of relief came over them—a relief of which I, listening to them speak, hear an echo. They talk about it as a benefit that is still precious to them today. And often, one way or another, they reach the same conclusion: Now that I have had this experience, I know life is worth living.

Aesthetic intelligence is about where and how well we are able to perceive beauty. It is a capacity akin to tuning in. Imagine two radios. One can barely pick up two or three stations. Another can pick up hundreds—it receives a variety of broadcasts in all languages, traffic reports and weather forecasts, classical music or golden oldies, political debates or talk-shows, sports news or stock-market commentaries, news or publicity, and so on. It is the same with the aesthetic experience: Some people can see beauty almost anywhere, others stay anchored to familiar, reassuring experiences, which then turn into aesthetic habits.

The difference is clear. Those with a limited aesthetic range have not only a more restricted world, but also a personality which is less rich and flexible. Their relationship with beauty may be rigid, limited, even troubled. They live with a fear of upsetting their own inner balance. They look with suspicion upon the new and have little wish to change. But those with a wide aesthetic range are more elastic and adaptable. They allow themselves to be moved, can embrace new ideas and perspectives, can marvel, and are ready to learn. They live in a much richer world.

To see a film or a landscape or listen to a piece of music is an almost entirely different experience if we are with another person. Compelling research is now showing us how social we really are, how our brain—our whole organism—is made for relationships. In the course of our evolution we have learned to read the emotions of others, participate and share. Our very survival depends on these capacities. In fact, from this perspective, not one of our experiences can be fully understood outside the context of relationships.

True, we cannot ever be sure we are really sharing our experiences. Yet every now and then we have the clear sensation that what we are feeling, someone else is feeling, too, that our experiences coincide, and that this fact, of itself, has value, especially when the experience is important to us. Such as in the

case of beauty.

The main way in which transcendence manifests is in a different perception of time. Usually we are captive of time: Days, hours, minutes, seconds, pass quickly, inexorably, and devour our life, or else they seem to pass too slowly, especially when we are bored. But in moments of awe, time stops. It disappears. It is not that, happy and satisfied and suspended in emptiness, we say: Time does not exist anymore. We realize it only afterward. It is like a spell. And when the magic ends, we still feel its beneficial effects, after returning, more or less sharply, to normality.

Music often has this effect. Sometimes, after a good concert, for a fraction of a second, the people in the audience remain silent. It is as if they needed a moment to recover from the enchantment. They have been carried away by the music, time has stopped. Now they realize where they are, back in their seats in the concert hall, next to other members of the audience. They have returned from space travel and need a moment to come back into themselves. Then they break out in applause, full of enthusiasm and gratitude.

We cannot do without beauty. If we do not have it, we die—at least psychologically.

To live without beauty means, from this point of view, to be deprived of oxygen. Then we will breathe with difficulty, pant, gasp, die. To live without beauty, because we are incapable of seeing it around us, and thus to think we live in a world in which it does not exist or is not possible, will lead to desperation.

And if this criterion is forgotten, we will live in a world that makes no sense. No longer is there good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Moral indifference reigns, and all values are reduced to zero. Without our inner compass, we live in a disorderly, arbitrary world, where absurdity, incoherence, and brute force are the law.

An individual who is devoid of aesthetic intelligence feels weak and his personality has no binding principle. To have no access to beauty is like being in a foreign country without a map: You do not know where you are and cannot decide where to go. You are confused and disoriented. Belief in the existence of beauty, in its availability and value, characterizes (when it is not dictatorial and intolerant) a healthy and strong personality. In short: Beauty is primary.

To sum up: We have seen how deeply interwoven beauty is with our evolutionary makeup, with our organism, with the very foundations of our psyche. Some of the theoretical models we have seen are widely diverse, yet they do not contradict one another. In the vast maze of hypotheses about the human condition, beauty pops up almost at every turn.

Beauty, as we have seen, is often ephemeral and uncertain, at times linked to antisocial tendencies, arrogance, and greed. But ask anyone you want if he associates beauty with good or evil, with love or hate: Very probably he will say "with good" and "with love."

Beauty is what we want for ourselves and the people dear to us. It is what seems supremely desirable and is inextricably linked to the survival of our species, as well as to our own individual emotional survival. This is why beauty has to do, though not in a perfect and complete way, with goodness, with love, and with the heart.